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# The legitimacy paradox

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The biggest challenges for journalism might not have to do so much with journalism. Open a random newspaper of 20 years ago or watch an old television newscast and you will see a different journalism, but one that is overall not as good as it is now. Journalism is more complete, diverse, analytical and critical. It is quicker, less institutional and more relevant to audiences. The average newsroom offers news around the clock, on a range of platforms, and in a variety of forms. Online, one can choose from an unlimited number of national and international news sources, and on social media it is hard, if not impossible, to avoid news. Whichever way you look at it, the news consumer is certainly better served.

Yet, who prefers reading academic journals over consuming the news might come to a different conclusion. In the last 20 years, the swift rise of journalism studies in the rank and files of academia has been closely related to the supposed downfall of its object of study. Narratives of crisis and decline, and their terrifying consequences for democracy, offered a powerful argument that helped to legitimize the importance and necessity of the discipline. It fostered a close focus on studying journalism as a professional practice and a cultural form. A flood of excellent studies has been done on the impact of digitalization and how digital tools have been integrated and ‘normalized’ in the newsroom.

However, to analyse the challenges that journalism faces, it might be more valuable to study how journalism is integrated in the digital than how the digital is incorporated in journalism. And paradoxically, it might be illuminating to focus *less* on journalism (cf. Broersma, 2018). In the current information ecology, journalism is abundant but it is surrounded by a superabundance of other cultural forms. These might be similar or very different, but float freely in a common space and cater to the demands of the same news users. Functions journalism traditionally had in society – from being a watchdog for democracy, to offering the ingredients for daily chitchat at the water cooler, or providing weather reports and classified ads – are also fulfilled by other types of information and have on some occasions even replaced journalism (cf. Broersma and Peters, 2017).

This implies that journalism’s legitimacy is at stake. Not just its authority to provide legitimate representations of social reality, but more broadly, its legitimacy to fulfil all

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kinds of functions it used to have in the everyday life of people. To deal with this issue, and the possibility of becoming irrelevant, a closer focus on the changing media habits and preferences of users would be revealing. How do these navigate the unbridled opportunities in a decentralized and networked information ecology? What kind of information do people value and why? How do they judge the reliability, quality and utility of information, especially now this is increasingly distributed on the basis of a networked logic?

With regard to audiences, raising the level of citizen's media literacy and making the news more transparent have often been suggested as solutions to counter a possible loss of legitimacy. The first raises all kinds of issues. From a normative point of view, one would like citizens to have some healthy distrust so they systematically inquire facts and consider arguments and opinions. Still, although this in theory could lead to a stronger legitimacy of those sources that pass the litmus test, it easily results in institutionalized and internalized suspicion. When people are required to critically challenge everything that provides them with stability and orientation in a complex information ecology and a messy social world, they have not much to rely on. Moreover, people might feel the need, and even the moral duty, to check what they encounter online but have neither the means nor the time to do so. It is convenient then to opt out and fundamentally distrust all information.

This position is further encouraged by scepticism towards the outlets that provide the news. Information, even when it is factually correct, is often perceived as biased and framed accordingly. This is a red thread in interviews with 225 Dutch news users between 16 and 25 years old that we conducted in the last 3 years. It is almost their default position to believe that journalists, 'of course', provide a biased representation of the news and that there, 'for sure', can be alternative facts and different visions on social reality. Almost all of them stated that there is no such thing as objectivity, and that the opinions and interests of reporters 'obviously' play into their work. Quite a few mentioned that the business side of news organizations impacts news coverage.

Higher levels of media literacy and critical thinking, as showed by the interviewees, do thus not automatically translate in more trust and legitimacy for journalists and news organizations. On the contrary, when scepticism is the standard, it is hard to be the authoritative source to go for news and information. When all and everything can be true or false, and this is frequently confirmed by examples of flaws and biases that are easy to find in news coverage, it is not just convenient to stop believing but also perfectly understandable. As danah boyd wrote in a luminous piece on media literacy,

Perhaps you want to encourage people to think critically about how information is constructed, who is paying for it, and what is being left out. Yet, among those whose prior is to not trust a news media institution, among those who see CNN and The New York Times as 'fake news', they're already there. [...] So when youth are encouraged to be critical of the news media, they come away thinking that the media is lying. Depending on someone's prior, they may even take what they learn to be proof that the media is in on the conspiracy. That's where things get very dicey. (boyd, 2018)

In spite of all good intentions, teaching people to discern fake news from reliable information thus ultimately might result in less legitimacy for journalism. Transparency,

regularly promoted by scholars and the news industry alike as an alternative to the objectivity norm, is counterproductive too. Paradoxically, showing readers how the cake is baked, what journalists know and do not know, and presenting alternative views do not help to retain and regain legitimacy.

As I have argued elsewhere, journalism must first and foremost be seen as a *performative* discourse, designed to persuade readers that what it describes is real. Its power as a cultural form does not rest primarily in an ability to mimetically represent reality (the ‘facts’), but in its power to present reality in accepted and recognizable form and style conventions. In modern journalism, these are primarily monologic. For over a century, news consumers tend to believe the contents that come with accepted and widely used news conventions and routines that justify and mask the subjective interpretation of journalists. In the split-second of this transaction, an interpretation is transformed into truth – into a reality the public can act upon (Broersma, 2010a, 2010b).

While this ‘magic trick’ might have lost some of its persuasiveness, it points us towards an inviting prospect to maintain journalism’s legitimacy. News users are developing new tactics to navigate a messy information ecology, while new habits to integrate journalism in their daily life take shape. In the current transformation from mass communication to a decentralized and networked ecology, people seem to turn to familiar brands because, as one interviewee said, ‘it is not in their interest to mess with the news’. Simultaneously, journalism as a specific cultural form is developing new formal and stylistic conventions that are capable of carrying its performative power. Although transparency and media literacy emphasize polyphony and the online information ecology seems to be first and foremost rooted in dialogue, these conventions are built upon established modern ones to link up with the expectations of users. Paradoxically, rethinking monologism in an online context might be a necessary condition for conveying legitimacy.

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